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SUBJECT: MUSLIMS IN SPAIN: FINDING A WAY FORWARD
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¶1. (U) Summary. Spain's diverse and rapidly growing Muslim community is new to the country and does not yet identify itself as Spanish. The community's national representation has recently been experienced significant upheaval, prompting many to question the structure of a Muslim religious leadership which in fact has very little contact with the group it represents. Meanwhile, an increasing number of secular and grassroots organizations are working on the project of integration of Muslim immigrant communities, prompting some to question whether it is more important to focus on religious or socio-economic issues in dealing with the community. Neither the Spanish government nor Spanish society has a clear picture of how to move forward, but the Muslim population continues to grow exponentially. End summary.

¶2. (U) The presence of a large Muslim population -- mostly from Morocco and Algeria but also from Syria, and other Islamic countries in Spain is a new phenomenon, particularly when compared to other European countries. During the Franco dictatorship, which ended upon his death in 1975, and through the transition to democracy, Spain was an exporter of migrants to other parts of Europe and to Latin America. When the Spanish government signed religious accords with minority religious groups -- Jews, Protestants, and Muslims -- in 1992 (giving the religions official recognition where the Catholic Church had been the only recognized religious entity before), there were an estimated 50,000 Muslims in Spain, mostly Spanish converts to Islam and a group of immigrants from Syria, and the Palestinian territories and other parts of the Middle East. Today, official statistics put that number at least 700,000, including almost 500,000 Moroccans. Unofficial estimates -- which include illegal immigrants -- suggest that there are more than 1 million Muslims in Spain, approaching 2.5% of the total population, and continuing exponential growth.

¶3. (U) Immigrants from Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan and Sub-Saharan African countries are economic migrants, in Spain to work mostly in the areas of agriculture, construction, and services (restaurants and domestic service). They are concentrated in Madrid and Barcelona, as well as in the agricultural regions in Valencia and Andalusia. Because of strict Spanish nationality laws, these Muslims are not yet Spanish citizens with any sort of political voice. Spanish law requires residents from countries other than certain Latin American states (which because of their historic ties to Spain have been allowed to negotiate special bilateral nationality agreements) to reside legally in Spain for ten

years before undertaking a lengthy bureaucratic process leading to citizenship.

¶4. (U) Because of the relatively recent arrival of most Muslim immigrants to Spain, in addition to the legal obstacles, unlike in the UK, France or Germany, there are few Muslims who are either culturally or legally Spanish. Recent immigrants struggle with the language and are too busy working to send money back to families across the straits of Gibraltar to involve themselves in Spanish society, culturally or politically. While many Spaniards worry that Muslims in Spain are not integrating well, most of these first-generation immigrants are still more concerned with immediate personal issues than with broader issues of cultural or religious identity.

The Voice of Islam in Spain...

¶5. (U) Representing this disparate community at the national level is the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE), formed at the time of the 1992 accords to be the community's interlocutor with the government on Muslim issues. The Commission is the union of two Muslim organizations in Spain: The Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (FEERI), made up mostly of Spanish converts to Islam, and the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE), a group of long-term middle-class immigrants from the Middle East. These were more or less the only Muslim groups in 1992, and as the Muslim population in Spain has grown, they have continued to monopolize the national political discussion on Islam.

...and its critics

¶6. (SBU) In 2006, however, most Muslims in Spain are not members of these organizations, and they are not necessarily

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aware of what the Commission does at the national level. While CIE leaders have often presented statistics on the growing Muslim community in Spain, they have done little outreach to those they supposedly represent. CIE has been criticized by Muslims outside the religious sphere for its lack of a democratic mandate and inability to represent the interests of the community. In particular, there is little (and until recently no) representation of the massive Moroccan community with the CIE. Mohammed Chaib, a deputy in the Catalan regional parliament and the only Muslim parliamentary representative at the regional or national level in Spain, has been a vocal critic of the Commission, claiming that its failure to engage with the new Muslim immigrant populations has impeded their integration into Spanish society and given free rein to extremists with intolerant or violent messages. This fringe element has led to fear and mistrust on the part of Spaniards toward their Muslim neighbors, as can be seen in the battles over the building of mosques all over Spain, as well as in occasional anti-Muslim vandalism and threats on mosques and Islamic cultural centers.

¶7. (SBU) Kamal Rahmouni, president of the secular Association of Moroccan Workers and Immigrants in Spain (ATIME), says that the CIE should play a stronger role in certifying imams and speaking out against religious leaders who preach intolerance. Rahmouni claims that while the CIE speaks of tolerance to the government and the media (former Secretary General Mansur Escudero -- who has no religious certification -- issued a fatwa against Usama bin Laden in 2006), it is passive in the face of growing religious extremism. As mentioned in reftel, in 2004, ATIME made a proposal to the Minister of Justice (MOJ) for the creation of a Muslim Council, which would be democratically elected and would be responsible for evaluating the building of mosques (many of which are financed opaque, with funding from the Gulf) and monitoring the teaching of Islam in public and private

schools. The proposal was an obvious challenge to the Islamic Commission, which responded vehemently that there was no need. The MOJ replied that it would not interfere in the decision over who should represent or organize Islam in Spain. The question is not settled within the community, and the government does not want to play a role in policing religion. (Note: However, the Spanish National Police operates an active outreach program with both official and unofficial Muslim groups to monitor trends in the community and to transmit a sense of official tolerance.)

A challenge to the old guard

¶ 8. (SBU) A coup of sorts occurred in January 2006, when the leadership of FEERI, previously dominated by Spanish converts to Islam, was challenged and taken over by a group of more conservative Muslims, including Mouneir Al Messery, the imam of the Saudi-funded M-30 Mosque (named for the Madrid ring road where it is located) and Haider Souilem Isli, of the Islamic Community of Fuengirola in Malaga. While the former FEERI leadership left the organization (and later started a new one), claiming that the new leadership would bring about the radicalization of the Islamic Commission, FEERI's new president, Felix Herrero (also a Spanish convert to Islam), pointed out that in a country where the Muslim community is so diverse, "...before, the entire leadership (of FEERI) were Muslims of Spanish origin, while now there are Algerians, Egyptians and Moroccans." He added that the new board included Shia Muslims as well, again broadening representation. Meanwhile he reiterated that Al Qaeda terrorism was "unIslamic." The new leaders have made numerous public relations efforts, for example sending Imam Messery and other members of the leadership to speak at press events and conferences.

¶ 9. (SBU) The unexpected result of the change at FEERI has been increasing pressure from the numerous new grassroots Muslim and immigrant organizations to enter the Islamic Commission, previously the realm only of the original signatories of the 1992 accords. According to Embassy contacts at the Spanish Ministry of Justice's Office of Religious Affairs, many activists have approached the Ministry in recent months to inquire how their associations might participate. The MOJ has so far refused to interfere in what it considers the Muslim community's decision on who should represent it in government interactions. Nonetheless, they say, pressure is building for the CIE to broaden its membership and create a more democratic entity. This will certainly make the organization more representative of the wide spectrum of Muslims in Spain, but it may also open a

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sort of Pandora's Box, revealing fissures within the community.

But does religion matter?

¶ 10. (SBU) But while the Islamic religious organizations battle for influence with the national government in Spain, it is unclear that many of them have a clear understanding of the needs of the relatively newly arrived immigrants from North Africa and other Islamic countries. In the wake of terrorist bombings in Spain and the UK, and especially following the 2005 riots in France, many began to wonder out loud what path Spain should follow to avoid something similar happening here. Some are suggesting that most problems in Muslim communities stem from social and/or economic exclusion, leading to a push for programs to promote the integration of these communities into Spanish society.

¶ 11. (SBU) The Spanish government under the Socialist Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has approached the Muslim community as an issue of economic and social integration rather than of religious difference. (Zapatero's recent meeting with thirty

leaders from the Muslim religious community was held primarily for Zapatero to promote his biggest foreign policy priority, the Alliance of Civilizations.) While the Zapatero government's policies have been favorable to immigration and to religious diversity, the GOS handles issues of religion and immigration across several different Ministries, and many have criticized it for lack of coordination.

¶12. (U) The job of trying to integrate the Muslim community has therefore mostly fallen to civil society groups, rather than to the government or CIE. ATIME has about 35,000 members and offices all over Spain where it advises immigrants on work and school issues, immigration problems, and Spanish society in general. ATIME's leadership also regularly speaks out in support of immigrant rights and engages the media on the benefits of immigration. The labor union Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) has been particularly active in recruiting immigrants of all nationalities, and has a network of more than 70 offices throughout the country where immigrants receive similar services to those of ATIME, with no obligation to join the union (though of course there is pitch). And there is an increasing number of new organizations reaching out to Muslims on a variety of issues, including women's rights, education, and functioning in the labor market. With these secular models, some mosques and Islamic religious center in Spain have attempted to reach out both to Muslims to facilitate their integration, as well as to the community at large, to build bridges and show a willingness to take part in Spanish society.

¶13. (SBU) As Ana Planet, a consultant in the office of religious affairs at the Spanish Ministry of Justice, said in a meeting with Poloff, religion is not necessarily the central issue when looking at Spain's Muslims. The MOJ attempts to put safeguards in place safeguards to ensure that Muslims are not discriminated against based on their religion, but in the end the success of the Muslim community will depend to a great extent on its social and economic development within Spain.

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Spain is just coming to grips with the fact that it is a country with a large Muslim immigrant population. Spain's Muslim community, in the early stages of existence, is looking to identify the path it will take forward. At present, it seems the Spanish -- against their usual centralizing tendencies -- are moving forward in a laissez-faire manner, much like the UK experience, where groups of Muslims set up their own associations and support institutions. The GOS seems to want to do something to create structures to deal with the diverse and quickly growing population of Muslims in Spain, but it hasn't yet decided what structures to build and how to go about it. Meanwhile there are literally no Muslims in the national government or on the national political scene, and extremely few even on the regional and municipal levels. With more and more mumbles on the street about the growing presence of Muslims, not to mention concerns about the possibility of social unrest or terrorism down the road, the Spanish government and society face the new challenge of working to integrate the Muslim community in a still largely Catholic society and building inter-religious and societal tolerance. Embassy Madrid's active Muslim outreach program has focused on the tolerance

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theme as an important message.
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